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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 008122

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SUBJECT: JORDANIAN OPPOSITION TO GENEVA ACCORD GEARS UP IN
FACE OF VOCAL GOJ SUPPORT

REF: AMMAN 07232

Classified By: CDA David Hale for reasons 1.5 (b and d)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Breaking weeks of relative silence on the issue, Jordanian officials, led by King Abdullah, are lauding the unofficial Geneva Accord as a means to enhance dialogue and complement efforts to end the current peace process stalemate -- while reiterating their support for the roadmap. The official praise contrasts with skeptics who fear the Geneva Accord will eventually join the growing pile of unimplemented peace initiatives, and the opposition's vehement rejection, which focuses on the plan's perceived abandonment of the Palestinians' "right of return." The Professional Associations' Council reportedly has launched a signature campaign against the initiative, but rumored protests in Amman have not materialized. The lively debate in Jordan about the accord underscores the importance of maintaining forward momentum long enough to convince publics on both sides -- again -- that compromise is in everyone's interest. End Summary.

GOJ VIEW ON GENEVA ACCORD EVOLVES

2. (C) Jordanian officials, publicly restrained about the effort after the Geneva Accord was first announced in Jordan on October 13 (see ref), are now heaping praise on the effort. "It's a very fascinating document.... what we're talking about in this document is Taba-plus, with the blanks built in," King Abdullah told CNN during his recent Washington visit. "I think that any initiative that complements the peace process, that tries to move the process forward -- and the principles in the Geneva Accord are actually in line with the road map -- I think it can only be a positive thing."

3. (U) GOJ spokesperson Asma Khader described the plan as an attempt to put the peace process back on track, saying Jordan backs all efforts aimed at helping the Palestinian people achieve their rights and establishing peace in the Middle East. At the same time she emphasized Jordan's support for the Palestinian refugees' right of return.

OPPOSITION LAUNCHES INVECTIVE, AND SIGNATURE CAMPAIGN

4. (U) Despite the unofficial nature of the accord, the opposition is mobilizing against it. On December 4, the 14-member Professional Associations' Council issued a statement condemning the initiative, rejecting "all treaties that compromise Palestinians' right of repatriation." The statement called on the Arab countries (read: especially Jordan) to cut diplomatic ties with Israel, saying armed resistance is the only viable option for Palestinians. The associations have launched a signature collection campaign to express Jordan's rejection of the initiative, and agreed to organize a public event for that purpose. (Note: Demonstrations against the initiative at the U.S. Embassy and UN building in Amman reported in the press this week did not materialize, but Post's security contacts are aware of the rumors. End note.)

5. (U) The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) issued a similar statement the same day. "Anyone who signs off a grain of sand from Palestine to the Jews and usurpers is an enemy of God and the Prophet Mohammad and is damned in this life and hereafter." It called for those who authored and signed the document to be tried in public and for Arabs to join in condemning the initiative.

6. (U) During an interview with the Arabic-language al-Ra'i newspaper a week later, MB leader Abd al-Majid Dhunaybat said: "We say that such documents will be torn asunder by the defiance of the Palestinian people and its absolute rejection of concessions, its commitment to its claim in Palestine, and the firmly-established right of return that no one will be able to concede." Referring to the perceived Israeli goal to "transfer" the Palestinian population to Jordan to ensure the

Jewish character of Israel, he added: "the resettlement plan does still exist in the minds of some of the international powers that serve the Jews and international Zionism. This is what we as Jordanians and Palestinians completely reject. The Jordanians reject it because it contains a violation of his right and the Palestinian rejects it because it contains a surrendering of his right to return to his homeland."

"RIGHT OF RETURN" CENTRAL TO DEBATE ABOUT ACCORD IN JORDAN

17. (U) In the days after the December 1 ceremony in Geneva, Jordanian papers were filled with commentary about the accord. Some, including Senator Faleh al-Taweel, wrote that he expects the accord to eventually gather dust on the shelf like so many peace initiatives that have come before. Jordanian-Palestinian journalist 'Uraib al-Rantawi agreed, but noted what he saw as a potential positive impact of moving Israeli public opinion against Sharon. Mohammad Ka'wash wrote in al-Arab al-Yawm newspaper that despite its unofficial nature, the accord could help bolster the peace camp in Israel.

18. (U) There has been much focus on the provisions in the accord dealing with the Palestinians' "right to return" to their families' original homes in historic Palestine. East Bank Christian journalist Nahed Hattar sounded Jordanian nationalist alarms, writing that if such an accord emerges as the basis for a final agreement, then the Jordanian government would be "forced" to nationalize all Palestinians who reside in Jordan thus leading to great (negative) change in the demographic and political structure in Jordan.

19. (U) Several commentators, including Al-Arab al-Yawm editor in chief Taher al-Udwan, interpreted the accord's attempt to address the "right of return" dilemma as a "cancellation" of the Palestinians right to return to historic Palestine that should be rejected. Hasan Abu Nimah, writing in the English-language Jordan Times, deplored the accord, saying it did more to satisfy the international community that deal with the true needs of the Israeli and Palestinian people.

110. (C) Palestinians in Jordan also disagree whether the Palestinian diaspora -- especially in Jordan -- should have a strong voice in determining the final solution to the conflict. Former royal court adviser Adnan Abu Odeh believes that Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, and not Palestinians outside, should have the final word in any agreement. There is no comparison, he told poloff, between the hardships of life under occupation and those faced by displaced refugees in neighboring states.

111. (C) PLO refugee affairs representative in Jordan Mohammed Abu Bakr disagrees, telling refcoord that no agreement on final status issues -- especially the right of return -- will hold unless the Palestinian diaspora signs on. He believes the Geneva Accord is a good vehicle for ordinary Palestinians to start thinking realistically about right of return issues and for the PLO to start convincing refugees that giving up the right of return is in their best interest. He readily admitted he was way ahead of Palestinian official and public thinking on this point. During the last year, Abu Bakr has briefed refcoord on the PLO Refugee Affairs Department's quiet efforts to seek funding for a diaspora-wide public opinion survey that could be used as the basis for a public dialogue on right of return issues. While the PLO's fundraising efforts so far have unsuccessful, there are hints the Swiss Government may fund the survey as part of the June 2004 UNRWA Conference in Geneva (details reported septel).

COMMENT

112. (C) Given Jordan's large refugee population, no other final status issue -- not even Jerusalem or final borders of the would-be Palestinian state -- raises Jordanian hackles more than the "right of return." Hard-liners will continue to argue that any compromise on the Palestinians' "right of return" will facilitate Israel's ultimate plan of "transferring" the Palestinian population to Jordan -- a hotbutton issue particularly among Jordan's East Bank community sensitive to the demographic realities of Jordan's majority Palestinian population. The lively debate about the Geneva Accord demonstrates Jordanians' deep interest in moving the process forward, but also the skepticism and frustration about unfulfilled agreements. It also underscores the fact that much hard work will have to be done to convince both populations -- again -- that a negotiated settlement is the only option.

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